Is atheism reasonable?

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Abstract: Can a competent atheist that takes considerations of evil to be decisive against theism and that has deeply reflected on the evidence rationally believe that atheism is true? I argue for a negative answer to that question. The paper begins by describing a sympathetic form of atheism that attempts to express an epistemically humble form of atheism. I argue that sympathetic atheism is incoherent. Some of the epistemic issues that arise in this context are deeply interesting, involving questions about false propositions that one is rationally committed to in virtue of egocentric reasoning. After arguing that sympathetic atheism is incoherent, I consider the prospects for unsympathetic atheism. I argue that unsympathetic atheism is unreasonable based on considerations about epistemic peers. Moreover, I consider a response to the epistemic peer argument that appeals to the Freud-Marx objection to religious belief. I argue that this objection is unsuccessful. The resulting dialectical position for the unsympathetic atheist is interesting as well. There's a coherent set of propositions that characterize   the   view.   Nonetheless,   the   view   is   unreasonable.

Sympathetic atheism is characterized by three commitments: (i) the concept of God is coherent, (ii) there's no God because there's gratuitous evil, and (iii) were there a God the world might not be all that different than it actually is. Condition (iii) is *the sympathetic condition*. It expresses the sympathetic atheist's thought that the evidential theist, a theist that has reflected on the evidence and attempts to draw appropriate implications from the evidence, can be epistemically justified in believing that there is a God. I shall argue that sympathetic atheism is incoherent. In the last section of the paper I reflect on the prospects for unsympathetic atheism. I shall argue that unsympathetic atheism is unreasonable.

I intend my discussion and argument to focus on the logical space of sympathetic atheism. The position I call *sympathetic atheism* is similar to William Rowe's brief development of friendly atheism.[1] A consequence of my argument is that *if* Rowe's friendly atheism is identical to sympathetic atheism then friendly atheism is incoherent. I will not press this point since the issues I discuss are of a more general nature and if the position I sketch is incoherent then it has significant ramifications for the rationality of atheism.

A prelude on justification

Before I turn to the main argument let me clarify my working notion of epistemic justification. The notion of justification I intend to capture is what I call the *Socratic justification*. This notion of justification requires one to possess good reasons for thinking that a

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[1] See Rowe (1979).

proposition is true. It is not easy to specify the general nature of Socratic justification but some elucidatory remarks can be made.

First, Socratic justification is distinct from a deontological conception of justification. One may be hard-wired to accept as valid instances of affirming the consequent. In some sense, one is not to be blamed for this belief and perhaps even entitled to the belief, since, after all, it is part of one's constitution to accept as valid affirming the consequent. Socratic justification is to be sharply distinguished from any such deontological notion of good reasons. Even though in the above case one is blameless to accept p on the sole basis of $p \rightarrow q$ and q, one lacks a good reason for believing p. Similarly, Socratic justification should be distinguished from Foley rationality. One may be inclined on significant reflection and given one's deepest commitments to accept as valid instances of affirming the consequent. Nonetheless, one does not have a good reason for believing p on the sole basis of $p \rightarrow q$ and q.

Second, Socratic justification is internalist in the sense that one has a good reason, R, for believing p only if one is aware of R. An awareness requirement is difficult to spell out but I intend to capture a sense of awareness in which one can be aware of the content of experiences, though lack a higher-order belief that experience has that content. In Ned Block's terminology I require access-conscious content, content that is available for direct rational control (including reporting).[2] This awareness requirement is at odds with standard forms of externalism in which dependency (or, more broadly, environmental) relations between the facts and one's beliefs can determine justificatory status.

Third, the nature of Socratic justification includes a commitment to the principle of avoiding arbitrariness. The principle of avoiding arbitrariness states that for any proposition p one is justified in believing p only if one possesses some other reason, R, such that R provides a good reason for believing p.[3] As I formulate this principle it is consistent with a form of foundationalism in which non-propositional experiences serve as epistemic unmoved movers, i.e., items that justify propositions without themselves requiring justification.

The incoherency argument and an initial defense

The main incoherency argument against sympathetic atheism is as follows.

(P1) If S justifiedly believes that sympathetic atheism is true then S justifiedly believes that there are gratuitous evils.

(P2) If S justifiedly believes that there are gratuitous evils then any close world with less evil contains gratuitous evils.

So,

(C1) If S justifiedly believes that sympathetic atheism is true then any close world with less evil contains gratuitous evils.

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[2] Block (2002), 208.

[3] R could be either a proposition or some kind of nonpropositional reasons—e.g., an experience. Also, this principle is intended to be about propositional, rather than doxastic justification.

(P3) If any close world with less evil contains gratuitous evils then a world
without gratuitous evils is not close to the actual world.

(P4) If a world without gratuitous evils is not close to the actual world then
condition (iii) is false, i.e., it's false that *were there a God the world might
not be all that different than it actually is*.

So,

(C2) Sympathetic atheism is incoherent.

Let us briefly consider the justification for each premise. (P1) expresses the idea that if
someone believes with justification that sympathetic atheism is true then that person must
believe with justification each tenet of sympathetic atheism. (P3) reflects the unassailable
thought that if the actual world and all the close worlds contain gratuitous evils then a world in
which there are not gratuitous evils is not close to the actual world. (P4) connects closeness with
similarity. The intuitive idea is that if a world containing gratuitous evils is not close to the
actual world then when we consider a world that lacks gratuitous evils it will be noticeably
different from the actual world. This possible world will contain much less evil or lack evils of a
specific type that the actual world contains.

(P2) is the least intuitive of the four premises. The main idea for (P2) is that justified
belief about gratuitous evil obeys a margin of error principle. As it turns out (P2) is false
because there can be misleading evidence for gratuitous evils. However, this does not impugn
the argument that sympathetic atheism is incoherent because the sympathetic atheist can't escape
the incoherency argument by appeal to the possibility of misleading evidence for gratuitous evils.
The dialectical situation here is interesting and I shall say more about it shortly. As I shall argue
the sympathetic atheist is rationally committed to (P2) when expressed in the first-person.

The intuitive case for (P2) rests on thinking about cases of good justification, i.e.,
justification not undermined by the falsity of one's belief or Gettier factors. For example, the
justification one normally has by sight for believing that, e.g., there are more than ten thousand
people in the stadium is inexact. This is to say that one's justification for believing this would be
the same given small differences in the facts. If, for instance, there were one less person in the
stadium one's justification would be the same. Intuitively, for one to have good inexact
justification for some proposition that proposition must be true in very close circumstances. If
one looks out on the filled stadium and believes that there are more than 10,000 people but
there's only 10,001 then one's belief is not justified. In the case of gratuitous evils, *if* one comes
to believe that the world contains too much evil on the basis of an aggregative judgment (i.e., not
enough goods of this type to justify evils of this type) then one's belief is justified only if in close
worlds there are still gratuitous evils.

Before we consider further the justification of the premises we must face an initial
difficulty. The difficulty is that the sympathetic condition is ambiguous. The similarity
relationship expressed in the sympathetic condition can be understood as either metaphysical or
evidential similarity. How does the incoherency argument fare once we disambiguate condition
(iii)? In the following I reformulate the argument first given a metaphysical rendering of the

sympathetic condition and then given an evidential interpretation. I shall argue that on either interpretation the incoherency argument succeeds. Moreover, I shall give more attention to the justification of the crucial premises in the context of the reformulated arguments.

Metaphysical closeness

If the sympathetic condition is understood in terms of metaphysical closeness then the incoherency argument becomes the following.

(P1′) If S justifiedly believes that sympathetic atheism is true then S justifiedly believes that there are gratuitous evils.

(P2′) If S justifiedly believes that there are gratuitous evils then any *metaphysically* close world with less evil contains gratuitous evils.

So,

(C1′) If S justifiedly believes that sympathetic atheism is true then any metaphysically close world with less evil contains gratuitous evils.

(P3′) If any metaphysically close world with less evil contains gratuitous evils then a world without gratuitous evils is not metaphysically close to the actual world.

(P4′) If a world without gratuitous evils is not metaphysically close to the actual world then condition (iii) is false, i.e., it's false that there's a close possible world in which God exists.

So,

(C2′) Sympathetic atheism is incoherent.

One observation about this argument that differs from the original formulation is that (P3′) arguably implies (P4′). In the original argument (P4) connected the notions of closeness and similarity. Since this argument precisifies closeness and similarity to metaphysical closeness we get the nice result of an overall reduction in premises.

The crucial premise of this metaphysical rendering of the incoherency argument is (P2′). The justification for this premise comes into two stages. In the first stage I shall argue that the sympathetic atheist is rationally committed to the claim that *if the evidence for gratuitous evils is at best inexact then (P2′) is true*. As it turns out the italicized claim is false but its falsity arises because of the possibility that the evidence for gratuitous evils is misleading. This leads to an interesting dialectical situation in which the only reason for rejecting this italicized claim is one that undercuts the justification for condition (ii) of sympathetic atheism, i.e., the condition that *there's no God because there are gratuitous evils*. I infer from this that the sympathetic atheist is rationally committed to a false proposition. In the second stage I will argue that the evidence for

gratuitous evils is *at best* inexact. Given this the sympathetic atheist is rationally committed to (P2′).

Stage 1: Inexact evidence & a margin of error

I have a bag of precious Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee. I want to determine whether *there are more than 500 coffee beans in this bag* (Let us abbreviate this proposition with "C"). I dump the contents of the bag in a bowl and begin counting: 1, 2, 3, 4, … , 501. On the basis of my count there are more than 500 beans in this bag. I then believe that C. Is this belief justified? No, it's just too close to tell. I might have double counted or forgot my place in the count. In short, there are very close circumstances in which my belief is false. Suppose instead I end my count at 800 beans and I believe C. Is this belief justified? Yes, there's plenty of room for a mistake. If I double counted or lost my place in the count it would not have resulted in a miscount over 300. This combined with the stadium case above suggests that cases of inexact evidence obey a margin of error principle. S is justified in believing that p on the sole basis of inexact evidence only if in very similar evidential circumstances p is true.

What makes a case of evidence *inexact*? This a vague matter best introduced by examples. Sight provides inexact evidence regarding the height of a tree; hearing provides inexact evidence about the loudness of a noise; taste provides inexact evidence regarding the contents of a dish; touch provides inexact evidence for the temperature of a body; and smell can provide inexact evidence about the goodness of milk.[4] In each case one can have the same evidence given small changes in the object. If the tree were an inch taller or shorter one's evidence would remain unchanged. It is plausible that in cases of inexact evidence one has justification only if in every closely similar case the proposition is true.

One objection to this is that it ties justification too closely to the array of possibilities. One can have misleading evidence that justifies a false proposition. Moreover, there are cases of misleading *inexact* evidence. Suppose I enter a coffee shop that contains 20 jars of coffee beans on the shelf. I wonder whether there are more than ten thousand beans in the coffee shop. I count the contents of one jar and determine it contains at least 3000 beans. Since there's no apparent difference between this jar and the remaining 19 I conclude that there are more than ten thousand coffee beans in the store. However, the remaining 19 jars are filled with a large hollow space and only the inside surface of the jars are filled with beans. This gives the misleading appearance that there is much more coffee in the store than there is; 100 beans in each jar suffices to give that appearance. So I'm justified in believing that there are more than ten thousand beans in the store but there's a close world—the actual one—in which that's false.

This objection succeeds in undermining a general principle about inexact evidence and margins of error, viz., S is justified in believing that p on the sole basis of inexact evidence only if in very similar evidential circumstances p is true.[5] However, it doesn't show that the sympathetic atheist is not rationally committed to the claim that *if the evidence for gratuitous evils is at best inexact then (P2′) is true*. To see why consider a sympathetic atheist that adopts this response. The sympathetic atheist argues that she can escape a commitment to this because the evidence for gratuitous evils might be misleading. How misleading? So misleading that there might be a close possible world in which there are not gratuitous evils. I take the 'might' here to be an epistemic might. So the sympathetic atheist who takes this response argues that for

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[4] This list is adapted from Williamson (1994), pp. 216-7
[5] Timothy Williamson notes this objection as well. See Williamson (1994) Ch 8, last section.

all she knows there is a close possible world without gratuitous evils. But remember that the sympathetic atheist also claims that *there's no God because there are gratuitous evils*. This implies that *there are gratuitous evils*. Moreover the sympathetic atheist must believe with justification that *there are gratuitous evils*. Yet on the envisioned response the sympathetic atheist argues that for all she knows there is a close possible world without gratuitous evils. This undercuts her justification for believing that there are gratuitous evils. So, the sympathetic atheist can't avail herself of the misleading evidence response.

This suggests the following argument. The evidence the sympathetic atheist has for gratuitous evils is either good or bad. If it's bad it's either inconclusive or misleading. A sympathetic atheist that attempts to escape commitment to the relevant margin of error principle must argue that there's a genuine epistemic possibility that her evidence is either inconclusive or misleading. But the argument for that undermines her justification for condition (ii) of sympathetic atheism. So a sympathetic atheist is committed to thinking her evidence for gratuitous evils, *if inexact*, obeys the relevant margin of error principle, i.e., (P2′) is true. This is clearest if we change (P2′) so that it reflects the first person perspective. Note the change from

> (P2′) If S justifiedly believes that there are gratuitous evils then any
> *metaphysically* close world with less evil contains gratuitous evils,

to

> (P2′ *for me*) If *I* justifiedly believe that there are gratuitous evils then any
> *metaphysically* close world with less evil contains gratuitous evils.

What's interesting about this dialectical situation is that both (P2′) and (P2′ *for me*) are false and for the same reason, viz., the possibility of misleading evidence. However, I cannot reject (P2′ *for me*) on the basis of misleading evidence to escape the incoherency argument. To do so would require me to take an attitude towards my evidence for gratuitous evils that undermines my justification for believing that there are gratuitous evils.

Second Stage: Inexact evidence and gratuitous evils

The evidence for gratuitous evils is *at best* inexact. One argument for this is an analogy with our evidence in the stadium case. Our evidence for gratuitous evils is similar to our evidence for the number of people in a filled stadium based on sight. We can determine that there is more than 100 people and less than a million but we can't determine based on sight that there's, say, 15,782 people. Were there a few more or a few less the evidence vision yields would be the same.

Another argument that the evidence for gratuitous evils is *at best* inexact is that the belief that there are gratuitous evils is not a properly basic belief. It is a non-basic belief whose evidence depends on an aggregative judgment, a judgment that weighs the balance of good and evil in the world. The evidence we have for an aggregative judgment is typically inexact. Think of the evidence we have for thinking there are n Democrats in the United States. Most statistical judgments have a margin for error, $n \pm m$. If m is larger than the allowed margin for error than the statistical result has little value.

Let's consider whether the belief that there are gratuitous evils is properly basic. Given my epistemological framework this becomes a question of whether there's some non-propositional reason to think that there are gratuitous evils. Perhaps one could have an experience whose content is that *that's a gratuitous evil*. I doubt that this is the case, but even so one would need to show that the content is suitably basic. A not unreasonable theory of experiential content is that it develops as one acquires abilities to track more complex objects and properties.[6] However these contents are not suitably basic since one needs justification for thinking that one has abilities to track these more complex objects and properties. If one thinks one can just see that Shady is a morally bad individual one needs justification for thinking that one has the ability to track these sorts of facts. So even if experience may carry the content that *this is a gratuitous evil* this content is not suitably basic. One needs further reasons for thinking that one has the ability to experientially track gratuitous evils.

Another consideration that the belief that there are gratuitous evils is not properly basic is that it's plausible that every evil can be redeemed. Suppose one is acquainted with some horrendous evil such that one just comes to believe (in a basic way) that this is a gratuitous evil, e.g., Rowe's case of Sue.[7] It's conceivable that that evil can be imbedded in a larger context in which the overall value of the world is better than not. The general point is that for any putative instance of a gratuitous evil its gratuitous only if certain other facts about the world hold, i.e., the evil is not required for a greater good, there's a better world without that evil, etc. The point here *isn't* to argue that there are not gratuitous evils but rather to argue only that the belief that there are gratuitous evils isn't properly basic.

If the foregoing argument is correct the belief that there are gratuitous evils is a non-basic belief. If the belief is justified then there's some evidence for it that includes a variety of elements. The evidence will include things like general beliefs about the world (e.g., damage to the body causes pain), general ethical beliefs (e.g., pain is bad), beliefs about the distribution of goods and evils (e.g., there's more evil than good), and beliefs about the relative value of the goods and evils (e.g., there's not often goods of type T to permit evils to type T*). This evidence is at best inexact. If it's good evidence that there are gratuitous evils then were there a few less evils and a few more goods the evidence would be the same. So, the evidence for gratuitous evils is at best inexact.

The result of the first and second stages is that the sympathetic atheist is rationally committed to (P2′). The remaining premises of the argument are plausible. Consequently, if the sympathetic condition is given a metaphysical interpretation sympathetic atheism is incoherent.

Evidential Closeness

If the sympathetic condition is understood in terms of evidential closeness (i.e., there's an evidentially close world in which there's a God) then the incoherency argument becomes the following.

The Incoherency Argument for evidential closeness

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[6] For a defense of this view see Lyons (2007).
[7] Rowe (1988).

(P1″) If S justifiedly believes that sympathetic atheism is true then S justifiedly
believes that there are gratuitous evils.

(P2″) If S justifiedly believes that there are gratuitous evils then any evidentially
close world with less evil contains gratuitous evils.[8]

So,

(C1″) If S justifiedly believes that sympathetic atheism is true then any
evidentially close world with less evil contains gratuitous evils.

(P3″) If any evidentially close world with less evil contains gratuitous evils then a
world without gratuitous evils is not evidentially close to the actual world.

(P4″) If a world without gratuitous evils is not evidentially close to the actual
world then condition (iii) is false, i.e., it's false that i.e., there's an
evidentially close world in which there's a God.

So,

(C2″) Sympathetic atheism is incoherent.

The first several steps of this argument are reasonable. The justification for (P1″) is the
same as in the original argument. The justification for (P2″) depends on the argument in the
previous section for (P2′). If the sympathetic atheist is rationally committed to (P2′) then she is
committed to (P2″). Given the argument in the former section she is committed to thinking that
her evidence for gratuitous evil is good. But since this evidence is inexact it will obey a margin
of error principle. So any world in which she has very similar evidence there will be gratuitous
evils. The next step in the argument (P3″) is secure as well. Given an evidential metric on
worlds if every evidentially close world with less evil contains gratuitous evils then worlds
without gratuitous evils are not evidentially close to the actual world. (P4″) is arguably a
consequence of (P3″) just as in the incoherency argument from metaphysical closeness (P4′) was
a consequence of (P3′).

The upshot of the incoherency argument appears to be that sympathetic atheism is
untenable.

Atheism & Sympathy

The sympathetic condition expresses the sympathetic atheist's thought that the evidential
theist, a theist that has reflected on the evidence and attempts to draw the appropriate
implications from the evidence, can be epistemically justified in believing that there is a God.
I've argued that an attempt to uphold this within the framework of commitments (i) and (ii) is
incoherent. However, an atheist might respond that she can uphold the sympathetic condition by
thinking that her evidence or her evaluation of the evidence is superior to that of the evidential

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[8] The metric on worlds is generated by the evidence that justifies S in believing that there are gratuitous evils.

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theist. This position strikes me as *unsympathetic*, i.e., a departure from the intention expressed by the sympathetic condition. It involves a superiority claim that conflicts with a good measure of epistemic humility. One significant aspect of the incoherency argument is that an atheistic position characterized by (i) and (ii) is inconsistent with an epistemic humility thesis. I shall not press this point further. Rather I want to consider whether it is reasonable to be an unsympathetic atheist. I shall lay out a brief argument that it is not reasonable. The argument may be viewed as drawing out a commitment of an atheistic position characterized by (i) and (ii).

The central idea of the argument is that the sympathetic atheist should think that the evidential theist is an epistemic peer. The notion of an epistemic peer is often relative to a specific topic. An individual S is R's epistemic peer when and only when S has roughly the same evidence that R possesses and S and R are roughly equally competent to evaluate the evidence. William Rowe should think that William Wainwright is his epistemic peer. By Rowe's light[9] Wainwright is just as capable as Rowe in evaluating the evidence with respect to theism and Wainwright possesses roughly similar evidence to Rowe.

The interesting question about epistemic peers is how peers should handle disagreement. Wainwright and Rowe disagree about the force of the evidence for gratuitous evils. Is it rational for Rowe to maintain his confidence that there are gratuitous evils? Intuitively it seems no. Rowe's confidence that his belief is true should be diminished because someone of equal ability and equal knowledge disagrees.[10] Two heads are better than one. So if one reports an A and the other doesn't report an A, it would be dubious to favor the result of one over the other.

Another consideration in favor of this view is that it is wrong to take the result of two equally good metal detectors when they disagree and the circumstances are the same. If two metal detectors, fresh out of the box, yield different answers to whether there's metal in this parcel of land then it is epistemically unreasonable to favor one over the other.[11] This verdict aligns with prominent theories of justification. If two equally reliable processes, operating in the same circumstances yield incompatible answers then it's wrong to favor the result of one over the other. If we only have two sources of evidence that are roughly equal and one source includes p whereas the other source includes not-p then neither the belief that p nor the belief that not-p is justified. So if disagreement with epistemic peers is modeled on the lines of disagreement between equally good metal detectors, disagreement undermines the justification for one's original belief.

The unsympathetic atheist faces two questions. Is the evidential theist an epistemic peer? Should we understand the relevant peer claim as modeled along the lines of disagreement between equally good detectors? There are considerable issues here that need to be addressed. One significant question involves whether there is some first-person privilege for justification? Should one's own reason count more than the reasons of another even though one thinks the other person is equally competent and has the same evidence? I do not think so. Were this correct one would think that the same principle held for moral reasoning and then we would have the unpalatable consequence of a first-person privileging of moral reasoning. This would lead to

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[9] My interest is in Rowe's perspective. Wainwright might think that he possesses additional evidence or capabilities that Rowe lacks. Wainwright might think, along with Plantinga, that he possesses the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit that gives him either additional evidence or an extra capacity. This issue, though, is immaterial to the present argument.

[10] What if the overwhelming majority agrees with Rowe and yet Wainwright dissents? This case provides evidence that Wainwright isn't an epistemic peer.

[11] I assume that the rate of false positives and false negatives are equal. This rules out the result in the famous strep cases in which disagreement may favor one verdict over the other.

cases in which one could resolve interpersonal moral conflict by appealing to the first person. But morality is not egocentric. Since there is not a first-person privileging with respect to morality there is not a similar kind of privilege in epistemology. Reasons do not become better in virtue of being *my* reasons.

So the main question becomes whether the atheist should think of the evidential theist as an epistemic peer. I think the dialectic at this point is interesting so let us proceed carefully. I have argued that *if* the atheist thinks of the evidential theist as an epistemic peer then an atheism characterized by (i) and (ii) is unreasonable. The reason is that the atheist should diminish her confidence that *there are gratuitous* evils to such a point that it is no longer reasonable to hold (ii). Let us consider how an atheist might avoid this move. The atheist might argue that the theist is not an epistemic peer on the grounds of the Freud-Marx objection to religious belief.[12] This is the objection that there's some non-evidential mechanism that explains the evidential theists mishandling of the evidence.

Can the unsympathetic atheist adopt the Freud-Marx objection in order to escape a commitment to thinking that the evidential theist is an epistemic peer? Note first that the following three propositions are not contradictory:

(F-M) There's some non-evidential mechanism that explains the evidential theists mishandling of the evidence.

(G) There's gratuitous evil.

(Non-Peer) The evidential theist is not an epistemic peer.

However, the argument from epistemic peers threatens the atheist's justification for (G). The atheist can't assume that (Non-Peer) is true. But the atheist needs a good reason for believing (F-M). However, as Plantinga has shown, the *de jure* objection is not independent of the *de facto* objection. As this works out in this context, (F-M) can't be rationally believed independent of (G) being rationally believed. Since (G) is called into question by the epistemic peer argument (F-M) can not serve as a reason that reinstates (G).

So, the atheist is in this strange dialectical situation. In order to make reasonable her position she needs to think that (Non-Peer) is true but the only plausible reason for that is (F-M). However, (F-M) can't be reasonably believed independently of (G) being reasonably believed.

Conclusion

I've argued that sympathetic atheism is incoherent. One may try to save atheism by adopting its *unsympathetic* form. But I've argued that this conflicts with the claim that the evidential theist is an epistemic peer. Furthermore, the Freud-Marx objection aimed to undermine this claim does not succeed. It appears, therefore, that atheism as characterized by (i) and (ii) is either incoherent or unreasonable.

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[12] See Plantinga (2000), Chapter 5.

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